

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001943

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PTER CE LTTE

SUBJECT: LTTE DISCOURAGES TAMILS FROM VOTING, BLOW TO RANIL'S CHANCES

Classified By: AMB Jeffrey Lunstead. Reason: 1.4 (B,D)

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Ending weeks of speculation about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stance in the November 17 presidential election, the LTTE met late on November 10 with their Tamil National Alliance (TNA) proxies in Kilinochchi and announced that the Tamil people would "not benefit from showing interest in the forthcoming election." The LTTE/TNA statement, followed by calls for an election boycott by several other LTTE-linked organizations, is being widely interpreted as a message (and a threat) to Tamil voters to stay home on election day. This, combined with the November 9 Supreme Court decision requiring that polling stations be moved further away from border crossings, may handicap the United National Party candidate Ranil Wickremesinge. In a November 14 Co-chairs meeting, the European Union Ambassador-designate revealed that EU Election monitor Lord Cushnahan might declare the election flawed if Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse won by a narrow margin. Co-chairs will meet Cushnahan prior to his public statement. Suggested language to cover two possible scenarios -- a free and fair election or a flawed election -- will follow Septel. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (SBU) A meeting between the LTTE and TNA leaders to discuss the election, postponed since November 4, concluded late on November 10 with an announcement by TNA parliamentarian R. Sampanthan that Tamil grievances and aspirations had not been addressed when either of the two major Sinhalese parties had been in power and that any interest in the elections would be "a futile exercise." In an apparent attempt to ameliorate the negative tone of the announcement and their reputation as an undemocratic organization, the LTTE and TNA muddied the waters by adding that "neither the TNA nor the LTTE would advise people not to vote." In the weeks preceding the meeting at the LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi, over 30 LTTE front organizations called for boycotting the election. When asked for an explanation of what the TNA announcement means, M.P.K. Gajendran of the TNA told an embassy FSN bluntly, "When people come to ask us, we tell them not to vote."

¶13. (C) Conventional wisdom holds that Tamils in general and particularly those in LTTE -controlled areas would support opposition United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinge, particularly when faced with the option of Rajapakse and his Sinhalese chauvinist allies. A November 9 Supreme Court decision requiring that polling stations be at least 500 meters from the military check points and that a voter may be detained in police custody if his identity is questioned might have an additional -- although not equal -- effect on suppressing the estimated 250,000 Tamil voters living in uncleared areas. UNP insider G.L. Peiris glumly told the DCM November 11 that Sampanthan's statement could only be interpreted as a call for a Tamil boycott of the election. All but conceding defeat for the UNP, Peiris said the statement "will make the numbers very, very difficult for us."

¶14. (C) The Co-chairs met on November 14 and concluded that a statement criticizing the LTTE action would inevitably be seen as favoring one candidate and hence interfering with the election. At the meeting, Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar related that he had detected a sharp change in attitude regarding the elections from the LTTE in Kilinochchi over the last month. EU Ambassador-designate Julian Wilson EU chief election monitor John Cushnahan was concerned that a victory of 50,000 votes or less for Rajapakse would oblige him to declare the election flawed because of the negative impact the Supreme Court decision might have on potential Wickremesinge votes. Cushnahan will meet the Co-chairs prior to any announcement the evening of November 18. The Co-chairs agreed that in case of a clear winner they should individually prepare statements calling on the victor to support the cease-fire agreement (CFA) and work with all parties to move the peace process forward. We will send suggested language for a statement Septel.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The LTTE kept its cards close to its chest until the eleventh hour. Even the TNA MPs were telling us just a few weeks ago that they believed the LTTE would quietly support Wickremesinge. For some reason, however, the LTTE has decided to discourage Tamil participation. Why is

difficult to say. One theory is that a Rajapakse victory -- and the hard line on the peace process he is likely to adopt -- would gain the LTTE some sympathy from the international community. Another is that the LTTE is genuinely concerned that no Sinhalese leader will meet their aspirations. Whatever its motivation, the LTTE's words of discouragement are certain to depress voter turn out in the north and east. In a race that remains too close to call, this could prove decisive.

16. (C) We are concerned by the possibility that Cushnahan might issue a statement condemning the election as flawed on the basis of the Supreme Court decision. If the voter turn-out is low in the north and east, we believe the LTTE/TNA announcement -- rather than the Supreme Court decision -- will have been the key factor.

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